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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES IRAQ, INTEGRATION WITH
ESTONIAN MPS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. In a May 18 luncheon hosted by the Ambassador, Parliamentary Deputy Speaker Maret Maripuu (Reform Party) and MPs Killo Arjakas (Center Party) and Eiki Nestor (Social Democrats) shared their views on the Estonian mission in Iraq, domestic politics, and Russian minority integration issues. On Iraq there was general consensus that if the UN Security Council extends the multinational force mandate, parliamentary extension of the Estonian troop mandate would not become an issue in the upcoming election cycle. End summary.

IRAQ

¶2. (SBU) Although a majority of voters continue to express opposition to Estonian involvement in Iraq, none of the MPs felt it would be a major political issue in the run-up to Parliamentary elections in ¶2007. The Center Party's Arjakas questioned whether the international community's democratic vision for Iraq could really be achieved, given the historical and cultural challenges there. But ultimately he agreed with Maripuu and Nestor that a mandate extension for Estonia's participation in the multinational force would likely pass in Parliament (though with some degree of difficulty). Extension of the UNSCR mandate would be critical to passage of the measure.

NO FEAR OF NEW POLITICAL PARTY

¶3. (SBU) Turning to domestic politics, none of the MPs believed the recent merger of the right-wing parties Res Publica and Pro Patria would change Estonia's political dynamics in a meaningful way before (or after) the upcoming 2007 parliamentary elections. Nestor thought it unlikely the parties would score any better combined than they would have individually. Arjakas thought the move ultimately would be seen as another in an unending process of political party creation, merger, renaming and demise that would only contribute to confusion and apathy among voters. That the parties continue to support different platforms and candidates in the run-up to presidential elections only added to the confusion, Maripuu noted, and gave the impression that the "merger" is less-than-solid.

POLITICS, INTEGRATION AND TOLERANCE

14. (SBU) In a wide-ranging conversation on the politics of integration, Maripuu and Nestor acknowledged that the Center Party's adept political maneuvering had secured itself the lion share of Estonia's Russian-speaking vote. The MPs were skeptical about the ability of the recently-renamed Constitutional Party (a party of Russian speakers) to challenge the Center Party's grip. However the Center Party MP Arjakas did express concern about the possibility of the Constitutional Party winning a seat in European Parliamentary elections. If it could gain a seat in the European Parliament, it would use Brussels as a platform for propagandizing misinformation to a broad European audience.

15. (U) The Ambassador stressed that while Estonia had made real strides in integrating its Russian-speaking minority, future integration challenges will likely be of a different nature. With Estonia's shrinking population and booming economy, U.S. investors and Estonian businesspeople had expressed concern about a growing shortage of labor. Estonia would likely become an increasingly popular destination for economic immigrants, and that would bring new challenges that would be important to address early. The Ambassador described a number of initiatives the Embassy had undertaken to encourage dialogue on tolerance and related issues.

16. (SBU) The Social Democrat Nestor acknowledged that tolerance had not always been highly valued in Estonia, something he ascribed partially to a hangover from the Soviet period. The country's size and relative insularity also contributed to its challenges. Arjakas noted that given Estonia's size a relatively small number of immigrants could have a

large impact on society. He wondered how open to immigration the country could afford to be without risking the loss of Estonia's cultural identity.

Comment

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17. (SBU) Given their parties' internal divisions on Iraq, Nestor and Arjakas may have played to their audience and underestimated the potential for the debate over Estonia's engagement to emerge as a political issue this fall. But we agree that extension of the UNSCR mandate will go far in taking the wind from the sails of those who might be tempted to make Iraq an issue. It will also be critical to maintaining unity on the matter inside the governing coalition.

GOLDSTEIN